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The Washington Times

Saudi royal seen as key

S. Rob Sobhani

Thursday, September 24, 2009

As leaders of the G-20, or group of 20 leading financial nations, gather in Pittsburgh today to address key issues relating to global economic stability, one world leader not immediately thought of but who can make a significantly positive contribution is King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia.

Whether the challenge is climate change, homelessness resulting from man-made and natural disasters, the fight against religious extremism, a just resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, world economic health or stabilizing crude oil prices, the king has offered his outstretched hand to the world.

In the interest of solving some pressing world challenges, the G-20's leaders should consider striking a grand strategic bargain with the king. While the presidents of the United States, Russia and China wield tremendous military, political and economic power, King Abdullah can arguably play an equally significant, albeit different, role from President Obama, Russian President Dmitry Medvedev or Chinese President Hu Jintao. Saudi Arabia's strategic heft as an energy giant, its heavyweight political status in the Arab world, its critical role in shaping the future of the Muslim world and the wealth of its financial reserves and overseas assets estimated at more than \$1 trillion, and its \$600 billion backlog of industrial projects make this member of the G-20 unique.

The proposal to elevate the Saudi king's role to that of a lead strategic partner is based on his track record. While some may express frustration with the pace of the king's reform agenda, there is little doubt it is anchored in a vision never before seen from the Saudi royal family. Shortly after becoming king, he delivered a speech in Mecca about his vision for the Muslim world: "Fanaticism and extremism cannot grow on an Earth whose soil is embedded in the spirit of tolerance, moderation, and balance. Good governance can eliminate injustice, destitution and poverty."

The speech was vintage King Abdullah: honest, groundbreaking and reform-minded. While opponents - religious zealots with little or no education - use Islam as a tool to attack both the Kingdom and the West, King Abdullah believes that, "We are progressives [taqaddumiyyun] by virtue of our Islam." In short, as the custodian of Islam's two most holy sites, King Abdullah has the religious authority to challenge the extremists within the Muslim world.

Although the United States has expressed concerns about Saudi behavior in a number of areas, King Abdullah is perhaps the only leader in the Muslim world with the credibility to offer an enduring pan-Arab peace deal to Israel that simultaneously empowers the

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Palestinian people and blasts extremist "deviants" as heretical. His offer of normal relations with Israel in exchange for the latter's withdrawal from territories that it captured after the 1967 Arab-Israeli war is a unique moment in history that may never come again.

The leaders of the G-20 who want peace must reach out to the outstretched hand of King Abdullah. In the current combustible dynamic of the Middle East, a grand bargain with King Abdullah could help ensure peace between Israel and the Arab world. In conjunction with taking steps toward combating religious extremists in the Muslim world and promoting peace between Arab countries and Israel, the king takes very seriously Saudi Arabia's role as the world's largest oil producer. He is fully aware of the enormous responsibility his country bears in maintaining stability in the global economy.

Accordingly, every time the virulent anti-American rhetoric of Venezuela's Hugo Chavez or Iran's Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sends oil prices skyrocketing, King Abdullah calms the oil markets by asking his oil minister to tell the world that supplies of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries are stable. As both the largest producer of crude oil and the country with the largest oil reserves in the world, King Abdullah's energy policy can touch every corner of the globe.

I recently asked the king's daughter, Princess Adelah, what is her father's favorite music. She told me, "The sound of rain." The king is an environmentalist at heart. He is very concerned about climate change and has established a multibillion-dollar fund to assist scientists tackling the challenge of global warming. His dedication to scientific pursuits to help humanity is what has led to the establishment of Saudi Arabia's equivalent of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology the King Abdullah University for Science of Technology. (KAUST), was inaugurated last week.

King Abdullah's sons have told me stories about their father's deep concern for the plight of the homeless. The king is ready to fund a global effort Rapid Response Task Force for Disaster Relief charged with the immediate care of victims of natural or man-made disasters that lead to homelessness.

On numerous occasions, King Abdullah has offered his hand in cooperation aimed at regional and global stability and prosperity. The G-20 faces a critical decision affecting the future: Will it allow the current status quo of conflicts, underdevelopment, and radical extremism, or will it take novel steps to promote the principles of moderation, prosperity and peace?

In the current combustible dynamic of a fragile international order, a grand bargain with King Abdullah will help ensure the latter.

S. Rob Sobhani is president of Caspian Energy Consulting.

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Saudi Arabia Celebrates 79th National Day

WASHINGTON [September 23, 2009] – Today, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia celebrated its National Day, marking the 79th anniversary of the foundation of the Saudi state by King Abdulaziz Al-Saud in 1932.

“Saudi Arabia marks its National Day with its eyes toward the future,” said Saudi Ambassador to the United States Adel A. Al-Jubeir. “The Kingdom continues to work toward its development and prosperity in the global community.”

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton commended Saudi Arabia on this historic occasion. “The United States values Saudi Arabia as a close friend and ally. Ever since King Abdul Aziz and President Franklin D. Roosevelt first met aboard the USS Quincy in 1945, our two nations have united in a durable and dynamic partnership that is based on mutual respect and mutual interest. Over the years, our friendship has deepened and enhanced the security and prosperity of both our countries,” she said. “On this historic occasion, I want to salute King Abdullah for his leadership on key regional and global challenges, from championing the Arab peace initiative to working to respond to the international economic crisis.”

Coinciding with National Day, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz hosted the Inauguration Ceremony of King Abdullah University of Science and Technology (KAUST) today. KAUST is an international, graduate-level research university. The state-of-the-art 9,000 acre campus is located along the coast of the Red Sea in Thuwal, Saudi Arabia.

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Saudi Grand Mufti Publicly Condemns Extremism

WASHINGTON [September 24, 2009] – In an interview published on September 23 in *Asharq Al-Awsat* newspaper, the Grand Mufti of Saudi Arabia, Sheikh Abdulaziz Al-Asheikh, stressed the responsibility of all groups and institutions of society to condemn and confront terrorist organizations and extremist ideologies.

“This ideology is being treated in a variety of ways [in Saudi Arabia]. It must be treated by the education curriculum, either by way of written materials or at least by lectures, to clarify this evil ideology to people and warn them against it...what is important is that in education there is something to wake people up from their indifference [to the dangers of this ideology], and help them understand what is happening in reality, and warn them against it,” said Sheikh Al-Sheikh. “Our news media should also treat this issue realistically, not with words and culture, but with a realistic and uncomplicated treatment [of the issue] to clarify to the public what these organizations are, what their goals are, and what harm they cause, and so the media must also be cooperative. Imams should also play a role in this.”

Saudi government officials and religious scholars have long been vocal in condemning the mindset that supports terrorism and anyone who resorts to violence and extremism in the name of religion.

During an address at the United Nations High-Level Meeting on Interfaith Dialogue last year, Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz stated, “Terrorism and criminality are the enemies of every religion and every civilization. They would not have appeared except for the absence of the principle of tolerance.”

To review additional public statements condemning extremism and promoting moderation, please visit the Royal Embassy of Saudi Arabia’s website.

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Saudi Delegation Arrives in Pittsburgh Ahead of G-20 Summit

WASHINGTON [September 23, 2009] – Saudi Minister of Foreign Affairs Prince Saud Al-Faisal arrived in Pittsburgh today for the G-20 Summit being held September 24-25, 2009. He will lead the Saudi delegation to the Summit.

The Saudi Minister of Finance, Dr. Ibrahim Al-Assaf and the Governor of Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA), Dr. Muhammad Al-Jasser, also arrived today for the meeting of world leaders and finance ministers. The G-20 nations are expected to discuss recent developments of global economy following this year's crises.

The Saudi economy's strength and influence in the world marketplace have grown exponentially during the past few decades. The Saudi economy is the largest in the Middle East and, in their "Doing Business" annual report issued earlier this month, the International Finance Corporation (IFC)-World Bank rated Saudi Arabia as the 13th most economically-competitive country in the world.

The International Monetary Fund (IMF) also recently praised the strength of the Saudi economy in a public information notice released in August that highlighted the Kingdom's "leadership role in stabilizing world oil markets."

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